

This Week in Congress

February 12, 2007

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." This week is National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans week. This morning en route back to Washington, D.C., I stopped by the Colmery-O'Neil Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Topeka to visit with veterans and thank them for their service. I hope you find this newsletter useful.

Kansas Veterans to Have Improved Access to Mental Health Services

I received word from the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), James Nicholson, this week that Manhattan will be the site of a new vet center and that additional counseling services will be provided in several First District locations. Congress established the vet center program in the late 1970s to aid Vietnam veterans experiencing readjustment problems. Currently, the only vet center in Kansas is located in Wichita. At vet centers,

counselors and outreach specialists provide services at no cost to combat veterans, their families and the families of soldiers who die on active duty.

As more veterans seek mental health care following service overseas, this announcement means the critical care they need will be available. The location in Manhattan, scheduled to open in 2008, will be an asset to veterans in the Fort Riley area. I am also pleased to know more counseling services will be available in locations throughout the First District to assist veterans who often struggle to access the care they deserve. Counselors have or will be hired in Liberal, Hays and Great Bend. To listen to my audio on this topic, [click here](#).

Kansas Mail Processing Facilities to Stay Open

Many Kansans have been concerned about reports that the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) had plans to consolidate mail distribution plants across our state. In January, I asked the U.S. Postmaster General to keep post offices in Kansas open. This week, I was notified that the USPS has completed its review of the post office in Hutchinson and that no significant changes will be made at this time. In addition, the USPS said no consolidations are being considered in Colby or Liberal - two locations previously mentioned in reports.

This is good news for Kansas. Post offices provide services that are critical to the success of rural communities and the continued operation at these locations means Kansans will receive timely mail delivery.

Hearing Examines President's Veterans Affairs Budget Proposal

On Thursday, I attended a hearing of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs to examine the President's fiscal year 2008 budget proposal for the VA. The President recommended a total VA budget of \$86.75 billion, an increase of about 8 percent over last year, which Congress will take into consideration as it develops the VA's 2008 budget. Testifying at the hearing was VA Secretary James Nicholson and representatives from veterans' service organizations.

At the hearing, I spoke to Secretary Nicholson about a number of issues important to Kansas veterans. I thanked the Secretary for recognizing the need for an outreach health clinic in western Kansas and eastern Colorado and encouraged Goodland to be chosen as the location. I also emphasized to Secretary Nicholson the importance of funding the Fort Riley State Veterans Cemetery to be located outside the post near Manhattan. I am pleased that the cemetery appears well-positioned to receive money when Congress approves the VA's 2008 budget. Additionally, I expressed my disappointment that the Administration again proposed establishing enrollment fees and increasing prescription co-payments for priority group seven and eight veterans, while not providing the funding for all veterans to enroll in the VA health care system. I also questioned whether the President's budget provides the personnel and resources necessary to address the increasing backlog of pending pension and compensation claims. The number of pending claims increased 17 percent last year and the hardship experienced by many veterans and their families waiting to have their claim processed is unacceptable.

Kansans Can Help Send Items to our Soldiers in Iraq

During one of my recent town hall meetings, I had the opportunity to speak with Melanie Elliott of Kensington. Melanie has developed a program called "Operation SOS," where packages are sent to soldiers overseas to let them know they are appreciated back home. Anyone who would like to be involved can contact Melanie by email at operationsos@gmail.com. I know the soldiers would appreciate your support.

Touring Salina Regional Health Center, Meeting New President and CEO

I was at Salina Regional Health Center on Friday to meet the new President and CEO, Michael Terry. Michael and I discussed health care issues and also toured the hospital, where I was updated on construction of the center's six-story patient tower. Michael comes to Salina from Ocean Springs, Mississippi, and I welcome him to the First District.

Continuing the First District Listening Tour

This week, I visited Leoti and Scott City. [Click here](#) to stay up-to-date on other tour stops still being scheduled.

In the Office

Brigadier General George Harris, Deputy Commanding General of the 89th Regional Readiness Command in Wichita, was in to brief me on military transformation and a number of other issues affecting the Army Reserve, including support for equipment and soldier benefits. I also joined General Harris and others at the Kansas Department of the Reserve Officers Association breakfast. Dr. Edwin Robinson, President of MidAmerica Nazarene University, was in with other representatives of the University, including Dwight Douglas, Dr. Frank Moore and Nancy Robinson of Olathe, to explain their plans for a graduate-level teacher education program in rural Kansas.

Kansas members of the Peace Alliance, Annette Karr of McPherson and Jon Huber of South Hutchinson, were in the office to discuss legislation creating a U.S. Department of Peace dedicated to providing nonviolent solutions to domestic and international conflict. Dr. Keith Phillips of Florence was in the office to update me on residential treatment and transitional programs for young adults at Morning Star Ranch. Doug Cook of Olathe and Stan Peterson of Topeka were in with the American Institute of Architects to discuss energy efficiency legislation as it relates to building design. Blake West of Overland Park and Mark Farr of Nickerson were in the office representing the Kansas National Educators Association to share suggestions on how to improve No Child Left Behind.

Eric Lund of Salina stopped by to share what Veris Technologies is doing in the precision agriculture field, specifically with carbon sensing. Danny Gillum and Michael Ahern of Dodge City Community College were in to talk about the Safe Schools Program for Kansas. Jacquelyn Cline of Milford was in Washington, D.C., this week with the Congressional Youth Leadership Council educational program to learn more about Congress. Bob Timmons of Fredonia and Ken McCauley of White Cloud were in the office to share the National Corn Growers reaction to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2007 Farm Bill Proposal.

George Webb, Executive Director of the Kansas Commission on Veterans Affairs, from Topeka came by to discuss the progress being made on the proposed Fort Riley State Veterans Cemetery. Raymond Rhodd of Topeka was in with the Kansas Military Order of the Purple Heart to convey support for funding for VA health care and improving veterans' benefits.

In my office this week for a tour of the United States Capitol were Kevin and Cindy Guffey of Hutchinson with their children, Kaylee, Avery, Landri and Joel. Also in this week were Mark, Mary and Meredith Koss of Haddam to visit Mike Koss, who is currently interning in my Washington, D.C., office.

Very truly yours,

Jerry